

Education debate about more than money

With education the number one priority of state government, it is clear that improving and funding public education will be a central theme of the 2007 legislative session. As Chairman of the Senate Education Committee I welcome the debate.

I also know that, while funding is always important, the debate must include issues beyond money alone. To help our students achieve their maximum potential, we must change how the education system has traditionally functioned and take advantage of new opportunities in areas not now provided for in the MAEP formula.

For those reasons, I am delighted with initiatives of State Superintendent of Education Hank Bounds and Governor Haley Barbour, both of whom have expressed truly visionary thoughts.

Just eight months ago, in March 2006, both chambers of the Legislature voted and the Governor signed into law a bill that Rep. Cecil Brown and I authored to phase in funding for the Mississippi Adequate Education Program over four years. This was a bi-partisan plan to remove politics from education funding and prevent our state children from being political pawns in an election year.

The vote in the Senate was 32-to-15 and the House approved the bill 95-to-27. I said at the time, "This is the first time we have said since 1997 that we have a plan in place to fully fund MAEP."

While it can be argued MAEP funding should be faster, this new law should be given a chance to work. Considering the fact that the state still has two years of outstanding bills with no revenue set-aside or rainy day funds and new increased revenue projections, which several economists suggest may be one time revenue, we must be especially cautious about over spending.

As of this writing, the Legislative Budget Committee has made no k12 budget recommendation, while the Governor has proposed \$165 million new dollars for K-12. His plan includes about \$80 million for MAEP for the next fiscal year, funding the phase in of \$65 million plus \$15 million for high growth districts. This would be followed by similar funding over the next two fiscal years.

I will encourage my colleagues in both houses to support this, along with the Governor's proposed overall 7 percent increase in funding for public education in fiscal year 2008, and his specific proposals, such as these:

- A 3 percent across-the-board pay raise for public school teachers, bringing the average salary for a public school teacher in Mississippi to nearly \$43,000 a year. This school year, teachers are making an average of 30 percent more than they were six years ago;
- Doubling funding for classroom supplies so teachers don't have to dig into their own pockets for basic classroom supplies;
- \$5 million for early childhood initiatives to help kids be ready to learn when they begin school;

- Re-introducing periods of daily physical activity and adding a course of study on healthy living to combat the unfortunate tendency of Mississippians to be obese and to suffer from high rates of diabetes and cardiovascular disease.
- Funding to redesign high schools requested by Superintendent Bounds to help address the state's 40 percent dropout rates.

This school year, per student spending in Mississippi's public schools from federal, state, and local sources is estimated to be between \$7,600 and \$7,800 and over the past three years alone state support for K-12 school districts through the Mississippi Adequate Education Program has increased \$323 million, or 19 percent.

While the Governor's education budget proposes more than enough money to "fully fund" MAEP, the essential question is: "Should all of the money go to MAEP or should some of it also go for a teacher pay raise, increased costs of health insurance and retirement benefits for teachers, and these other new ideas?"

I am passionate about the cause of public education. I believe these new ideas have merit. I also believe our commitment to education should be judged not by how much money is spent but by the results we achieve. That is the only test that matters.

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